

# Falun Gong's Counter Media Campaign

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## Introduction

Much literature has been written on Chinese government's persecutions of Falun Gong, or Falun Dafa, a self-cultivation and quasi-religious qigong practice banned in China since July 1999. Falun Gong has been making headlines in the world media as a champion of human rights and victim of violations of human rights in China. While Chinese government's campaigns against Falun Gong and cults are worth noting, it is equally fascinating to note Falun Gong's worldwide protests against the persecutions as constituting a new protest culture in the 21st century.

The Counter Media Campaign  
Falun Gong's protests against the persecutions by the Chinese government combine the traditional forms of protests (e.g. taking to the streets and Tiananmen Square) with a new form of protests—using the media to stage a counter media campaign against its persecutors. The counter media campaign has proven to be the most effective means to sustain its transnational growth and influence despite various efforts by the Chinese government to crush the “cult” in China and defame it outside China.

Li Hongzhi and his Falun Gong disciples are media savvy. They have skillfully used Western media's interests in human rights issues by presenting themselves as victims of a totalitarian and communist regime that is notorious for human rights violations. Through victimisation and self-victimisation, Falun Gong has managed to stay being the headline news in the world media (at least for three years since it was banned in China in 1999). Falun Gong disciples have also skillfully used their own global media networks composed of the Internet, newspapers, magazines, media production studios, radio, and television broadcasting units to stage a counter media campaign, or to use their words, to “send forth righteous thoughts” to the world. In the counter media campaign, Falun Gong poses itself not only as a self-promoter and public relations expert, but also as a media watcher, analyst, usurper, and dissector.

Inside China, Falun Gong followers have changed their strategies from staging a high profiled showdown in protests and demonstrations on Tiananmen Square to staging a high profiled media campaign against the state authorities after the traditional channel of protests was blocked. So far, the staged strategies include sending a barrage of mysterious, automated voice messages praising Falun Gong to mainland telephone users, slipping pro-Falun Gong contents into Chinese official newspapers, and sabotaging local terrestrial and cable TV transmission systems to relay their own print and video materials. The guerrilla media warfare became a bold, concerted, and high-profile media protest when Falun Gong disciples hijacked Sinosat 1, the satellite that transmits China's satellite broadcasting programs, to insert pro-Falun Gong videos and slogans to Chinese audiences. During the World Cup soccer finals between 23 June and 30 June 2002, nine channels of CCTV (Central China Television) and at least ten provincial TV channels were usurped by Falun Gong. Since then on almost every important occasion, such as the anniversaries of Hong Kong's return to China (1 July), the National Day (1 October), and the Spring Festival (Chinese New Year), Falun Gong has broken into the state media vectors to stage mediated protests.

Outside China, Falun Gong has kept vigilant of its images presented in both Western and Chinese media. While encouraging Western media to use less pejorative language (as in changing terms “cult” to more neutral ones such as “sect” or “movement”) and to present a favorable image of it, Falun Gong has been trying to refute every accusation by the Chinese government through content analyses and dissections of audio-video footages from the Chinese state media. “A Staged Tragedy: Self-Immolation in Tiananmen Square—Analysis of CCTV's Video Tape of January 23, 2001,” one of Falun Gong's “truth clarification” series, is such an example. Through scene-by-scene news dissection and frame-by-frame video analysis, the program exposes the tricks of news fabrication (hence false accusations on Falun Gong) in Chinese media's representations of the “cult.”

Falun Gong's global visibility directly relates to and results from its strategic use of the media to stage a series of protests. The Internet especially has become a key medium in the counter campaigns against persecutions. Many observers have noted Falun Gong's high-profile presence on the Internet.

Danny Schetcher, for example, points out that the Falun Gong story appears to be “as much about technology as it is about religion; it offers a fascinating glimpse of an ancient religious tradition that is mutating rapidly as it makes the leap into cyberspace.” The Internet is the major tool of communication, organisation, and mobilisation for Li Hongzhi and the leadership of Falun Gong. It also constitutes an important part of being a Falun Gong practitioner. Through the Internet, concerted actions can be taken among Falun Gong practitioners all over the world. From the April 25 (1999) Zhongnanhai protest, the annual Falun Dafa Day (13 May), global Dafa conferences, to the global trial on Jiang Zemin (former Chinese president who was responsible for the persecutions of Falun Gong), the Internet is constituted as the medium of protests. Because of the centrality of the Internet in organising and mobilising protests, Falun Gong is described by Karaflogka as one of the “New Cyberreligious Movements,” (NCRMs) and by Thornton a kind of “new cybersects.”

## Conclusion

Falun Gong's counter media campaign signifies a new era of protests in Chinese political culture. Never before in Chinese history has any organisation, group, or party been able to pose an open protest against the ruling authorities through the power of the media as Falun Gong does. Falun Gong's concerted and consistent efforts to stage the counter media campaign against the Chinese government are illustrations of how cyber-networked and mediated protests can mobilise and accumulate social capitals across spatial and temporal disparities, and how an alternative ideology can be sustained through transnational visibility of dissent.

## Works

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## Notes

1. Since 2002 Falun Gong followers had broken into local terrestrial television broadcasts in North-east China and hacked into cable television networks in half-a-dozen different cities including Laiyang, Yantai, Chongqing, Changchun and Harbin. David Murphy, "China—Mixing Signals," *Far Eastern Economic Review* 11 July 2002. Also see "Falun Gong saboteurs nabbed in Jilin," *People's Daily*, available from [http://english.peopledaily.com.cn/200204/02/eng20020402\\_93317.shtml](http://english.peopledaily.com.cn/200204/02/eng20020402_93317.shtml) (20 January 2004)
2. For Chinese official accounts of Falun Gong hijacking Chinese satellite broadcasting, see "special reports" from <http://www.zhengqing.net.cn/weixing/index.htm> (24 March 2004).
3. The video is made into VCD and distributed free around the world. It is also accessible from major Falun Gong websites. For example: [www.minghui.org/mh/articles/2001/10/1/17092.html](http://www.minghui.org/mh/articles/2001/10/1/17092.html), [www.clearwisdom.net/emh/special\\_column/self-immolation.html](http://www.clearwisdom.net/emh/special_column/self-immolation.html) (20 March 2004)
4. For examples, see John Wong, "The Mystery of Falun Gong: Its Rise and Fall in China," *The Mystery of China's Falun Gong: Its Rise and Its Sociological Implications* (Singapore: World Scientific Publishing Co., 1999). Stephen D. O'Leary, "Falun Gong and the Internet," *Falun Gong's Challenge to China: Spiritual Practice or "Evil Cult"*, ed. Danny Schechte (New York: Akashic Books, 2000).
5. Danny Schechter, *Falun Gong's Challenge to China*, 2000, p. 190.